THE KING CARES AFTER ALL
II KINGS 6:24-30
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"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son. And his name shall be Immanuel - God with us." The Gospel of Christmas is at once so very simple and so terribly complex that it resists amplification.

As they lived out their strange and unique existance the Jews could not get the thought out of their minds - that Jahweh, the one God, was involved in their history, and that one day he would come to dwell among them in a dramatic and saving way. They saw the presence and power of their God in the Exodus, their unlikely liberation from Egyptian slavery: they saw it in the wandering through the wilderness and the conquest of the promised land. Their prophets pointed to God's presence in the day to day occurrences in the life of the nation, famine, feast, victory, defeat - and finally exile. "But God would act again" they promised. Again God would intervene in history on their behalf and the nation would be delivered.

Their theology of Immanuel - God with us reaches a high point of confessional and poetic beauty in the Psalter - "The Lord is my shepherd." God is as immediate to his people as a shepherd is to his sheep. God is intimately and personally involved in the life of men: in the good times - in green pastures and by still waters: but also in the bad times - in the presence of the enemy: and also in the worst of all times - even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Down through the centuries the idea of God's immediate presence with his people builds to a final crescendo when in their strange history a child was born -a child who himself was Immanuel - God with us. That conviction is the touch-stone of everything we do in the Church: we affirm it and celebrate it and confess it every time we gather in this place. That conviction is, in a sense, the touch-stone of Western Civilization. And it is, at once, so very simple but terribly complex, that it sometimes gets lost in that season of the year set aside specifically for its celebration.

So let us think this morning about the Gospel of Christmas - by way of an obscure story out of that strange history of those strange people. I did not read the story as an Old Testament Lesson because it's rather grim on a day which ought not to be too grim. The story is found in the sixth chapter of the second book of Kings, in what the scholars call

the "Elisha cycle." It takes place some 800 years before the birth of Christ in the Northern kingdom of Israel and its capital city, Samaria.

Behadad, ruler of Syria, has Samaria under seige. Inside the city the seige has been terriby effective: the food is gone: people are starving: and under these conditions normal behavior has been replaced by the kind of behavior that grows out of slow starvation and panic. Good people have begun to act like animals. The King of Israel, Jehoram, paces back and forth on the city wall everyday, accutly aware of his untenable situation, dividing his attention between the hopless military position outside the wall and the wretched human condition inside.

In their extreme agony and suffering two women in the city strike an evil agreement. One of them keeps her part of the bargain: the other does not. The offended woman seeks out the King pacing back and forth on the wall and cries: "Help, my Lord, O King!" Jehoram, understandably preoccupied tries to brush her off. He can do nothing about the empty winepresses and bare threshing floors. But when he discovers her problem, the depths of her degradation and shame, her agony and humiliation, the King tears his clothes - and puts on sack cloth - the traditional symbol of mourning - for all the people to see.

The people of Israel saw a new king that day, a king who was not above it all, a king who made common cause with all of them, a king who could identify with their mundane, personal sufferings. Surely they must have looked up at Jehoram sufferning with them and for them and said, "So the King Cares After All," Surely that must have given them heart.

That is precisely the fundamental Christian claim: nothing more. That is the Christmas Gospel - the reason for joy and celebration at the birth of Jesus Christ. God has made common cause with us by coming to be among us. The King cares after all, and because he does, nothing is the same. Nothing can ever be the same again. Let's pursue that for a moment theologically, politically,psychologically and personally - four categories that encompass the human experience.

Theologically the Gospel of Christmas is difficult for us precisely because it is so very simple and we Presbyteirans fancy ourselves so very cerebral. When we think about God, it is usually in intellectual categories. God, we understand, is the first cause among all causes, the creator, the ultimate mind, the

source of all being or, if you are a philosopher, "being itself". Good, rational theology is part of our history. When the Westminister Divines sat down to define God they pulled together an extensive list of superlatives: listen to their words..."infinate in perfection, a most pure spirit...immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible, almighty, most wise, most holy, most free, most absolute.." Now, far be it from me to be too critical of the mentality that created that August document. The writers were the best minds of their time. But it is so terribly impersaonl and passionless, so very cerebral. And the Christmas Gospel thrusts us into that most personal scenario - that human experience which defies intellectualizing - the birth of a child. tHe Christmas Gospel strips us of all our dogmatic theology and places us in a barn, with an unmarried Jewish maid and her fiance, poor people, about to become parents. It takes that eloquent Messianic hope along with our sophisticated theology and demolishes it all with the earthy experience of human birth. It takes us to the manger and says "Behold, your God!", more of him than you will ever find in books, seminars and theological speculation.

That is why, by the way, preachers - ordinarily at no loss for ideas and words - prefer a choir cantata or a children's play to a sermon on Christmas Sunday.

Politically - in the world of men and decision making the Christmas Gospel is equally devastating. John Hadham expresses our position in this way: "What interests me is not whether He exists, but assuming He exists, what He is like and what on earth He is up to at the present moment. Of the home life of God I know nothing...But I am concerned with this world in which I happen to live...

Well, frankly, this world doesn't always look like the arena of God's activity. In fact, much of it doesn't seem to make sense - and if God is involved he's doing a pretty good job at keeping a low profile. Christmas time always exaggerates human suffering; but think for a minute about recent events: think about two plane crashes in Chicago: think about the young Senator elect from Delaware whose wife and 18 month old baby were killed in a car accident last week: think about the wife and two little girls celebrating Christmas alone because husband and father is somewhere in North Vietnam, a P.O.W.: think about the miserable people of S. E. Asia, caught in a deadly vice of international conflict - a genteel charade played out in a Paris Solon while they die in their homes and fields and

schools and churches.

The Gospel of Christmas proclaims that God is in all of that too: that God cares - that he weeps at man's stubborn refusal to try peace as a viable option. Jehoram walked the wall of Samaria in sack cloth. So the Gospel of Christmas affirms that God walks the walls of Saigon and Hanoi and Peking and Moscow and Washington - suffering with his children; identifying with their plight: angry with their sin but weeping with them as they suffer.

The story is told of a skeptical, cynical, confirmed atheist who purchased a sign for' his study that read "God is Nowhere". That's the way the world looks sometimes. But the man's small daughter had other ideas, and one night drew a simple line between the W and the H so that the sign read "God is Now/Here". That's the Gospel of Christmas - simple - devastating.

Psychologically, in that arena of emotions, motivations, relationships with self and others we are learning about a kind of universal human condition endemic to modern man. The philosopher - psychologists call it estrangement, alienation, existential anxiety. But the only person I know who expreiences it in those high-powered terms is Charlie Brown - who one particularly depressing day, said - "I have angst", a good German philosophical term that combines all of the above with a little original sin thrown in for good measure.

In your life and mine it comes in the form of dryness,staleness, a sense that my life really doesn't matter much, an occassional terrifying feeling that nobody really cares about me. One school of psychiatry, popularized in the best seller, "I'm O.K. - You're O.K." suggests that our basic psycholigical hang-up is a feeling of "not OKness". And because we have been taught since infancy that we are not "OK", we live out our lives trying to prove that we are O.K., trying desparately to matter to someone - to our parents, spouses, children, collegues - and God.

The Gospel of Christmas says simply: "You matter: you are O.K.: God loves you just as you are: you are free from having to engage in that most futile human enterprise - proving your worth and value. "The King cares after all".

Personally, in that deep arena of heart and spirit you and I need to know that: we need to be cared for and loved: we need someone to share our hurts and tears and joys. There is no deeper human need than that. The New York Times last summer ran an editorial

about an elderly woman in the hospital with Parkinson's disease. She lived alone in one small room in a run-down tenemant. But her sole concern while in the hospital was to go home. The hospital personnel couldn't understand and so they went to see what "home" was. They found the near-empty one room. On her bed stand was a tiny figure of Santa Claus and beside her place on the bed a child's stuffed animal worn from hugging. That's how deeply our need runs.

Edmund Steimle writes: "Sometimes I feel that the whole world is alive with God - quite literally! - A close call on the interstate highway and I'm grateful: a lull in the traffic of a busy street and I dart across grateful that he provided the lull: a bathrobe catches on a door knob and rips - and what's God got against me this morning?" (The Protestant Hour, 11/28/71)

At the Columbia - Princeton football game last year, Columbia - the under-dog, stopped Princeton in a magnificent goal-line stand. And the Columbia band broke out into the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's Messiah.

The Christmas Gospel says, "Why not?" The birth of the Christ child brings God right into the common, every-day stuff of your life and mine, and declares that he cares about what happens there. The Christmas Gospel declares that in Jesus Christ God has come looking for us - right where we live-in something so common as human birth.

Robert Raines put it beautifully:

"I'm a child playing hide-and-seek waiting for someone to find me and call my name
and say, 'you're it!'
And you did it Lord!
You found me hiding...
You found me and whispered my name
and said, "You're it!'
And I believe you mean it...
And now maybe
the silent tears call roll out of my throat
get wet on my cheeks
And now maybe

I don't have to play hide - and - seek anymore." (Alive Now, Winter 72. P.40)

One of my favorite Christmas stories as a child was "The Littlest Angel", a story which - as is the case with so many others - turns out to be pretty good theology - and thus a vehicle of the Gospel. I'm sure you know it - it's about a young boy who finds himself suddenly part of the angels of heaven and who has many, many problems conforming to behavior appropriate in the celestial courts. He can't sing very well, he likes to swing on the gates, his robe is constantly soiled and halo tarnished. When all of heaven begins to prepare for the birth of God's son on earth the littlest angel's inadequacies become even more apparent. What will he give? - What will he bring? Finally he decides on a rough box - the box that contains the invaluable treasures of little boy; a worn dog collar, some smooth pebbles. Hesitantly he carries the box, then stumbles, drops it and it comes crashing, spilling down at the foot of the very throne of God. There - for all to see are the common, vulgar, rough, dirty items: and the story ends with that box transformed into the Star of Bethlehem.

That's the Gospel of Christmas: a God who cares about the things little boys care about. That's what's almost unbearably good about Christmas - that God cares intimately and personally and lovingly for us - and for the things we care about.

So - on this Christmas Sunday let yourself be touched: let youself be moved - allow a tear at the incredible goodness of it all.

For the King Cares After All...

"...to you is born this day, a Savior who is Christ the Lord...
Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth, peace among men
with whom he is pleased." AMEN

Father, we are grateful for the beauty of this blessed season: for the joy it ignites in our hearts: for your care which it expresses. Fill us today with your love - love that has come among us in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN